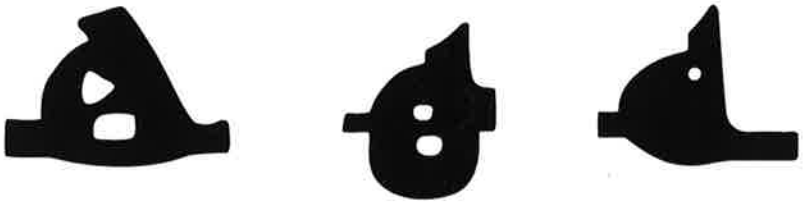
CHAPTER TWO

The Birth of Kufic

The birth of Kufic represented, in many ways, a radical break with the past in which Hijazi had still been anchored. The rules that were defined at the outset of the Kufic tradition essentially remained the same throughout its lifespan. Whereas Hijazi styles were akin to individual handwriting, Kufic represents a mature calligraphy based on extremely precise definitions. Let us take one letter, medial *hā'*, as an example.



A.I *B.II* *D.I*

In style A.I, the letter rests on the baseline and its vertical bar slopes to the left, with well-defined 'eyes.' But in B.II, it extends over both sides of the baseline, which coincides with the letter's median horizontal bar; the 'eyes' are small, while the vertical bar is straight and linked to the baseline by a nearly circular stroke to the left. In D.I, the same letter sits on the baseline and consists of a semicircle that rests on a vertical bar with a pointed head. In much the same way, key letters appear in consistently the same form in each of the seventeen main Kufic styles, which boil down to six broad families. The adherence to these rules is, in most manuscripts, very close, becoming looser in less stylistically accomplished examples.

A novel codification

Kufic scribes' rigorous approach to writing was underpinned by an elaborate geometrical codification. As this has already been discussed elsewhere, I will only restate, here, its most essential elements.[1] Kufic manuscripts were laid out with a stable number of lines per page, and these were strictly parallel and equidistant.[2] Each line was, in turn, divided into parallel 'interlines', equal to the thickness of the pen, which defined the main pivotal points of the letters. This interline grid was closely adhered to in manuscripts of the highest standard. For example in the Qur'an of Amājūr (Figure 31), which was completed in 876, probably in Syria, the body of the elongated letters *(kāf, dāl)* and the vertical stroke of final *nūn* reach up to the second interline. The top of *wāw, fā'/qāf, hā', mīm* and initial *'ayn* falls on the third interline, while *alif* and the other tall letters are six interlines high. Likewise, the whole script is codified along the lines of this geometrical grid.[3] The underlying model was followed in virtually all Kufic manuscripts, but with more or less precision according to the lavishness of the commission and skill of the scribe.[4]

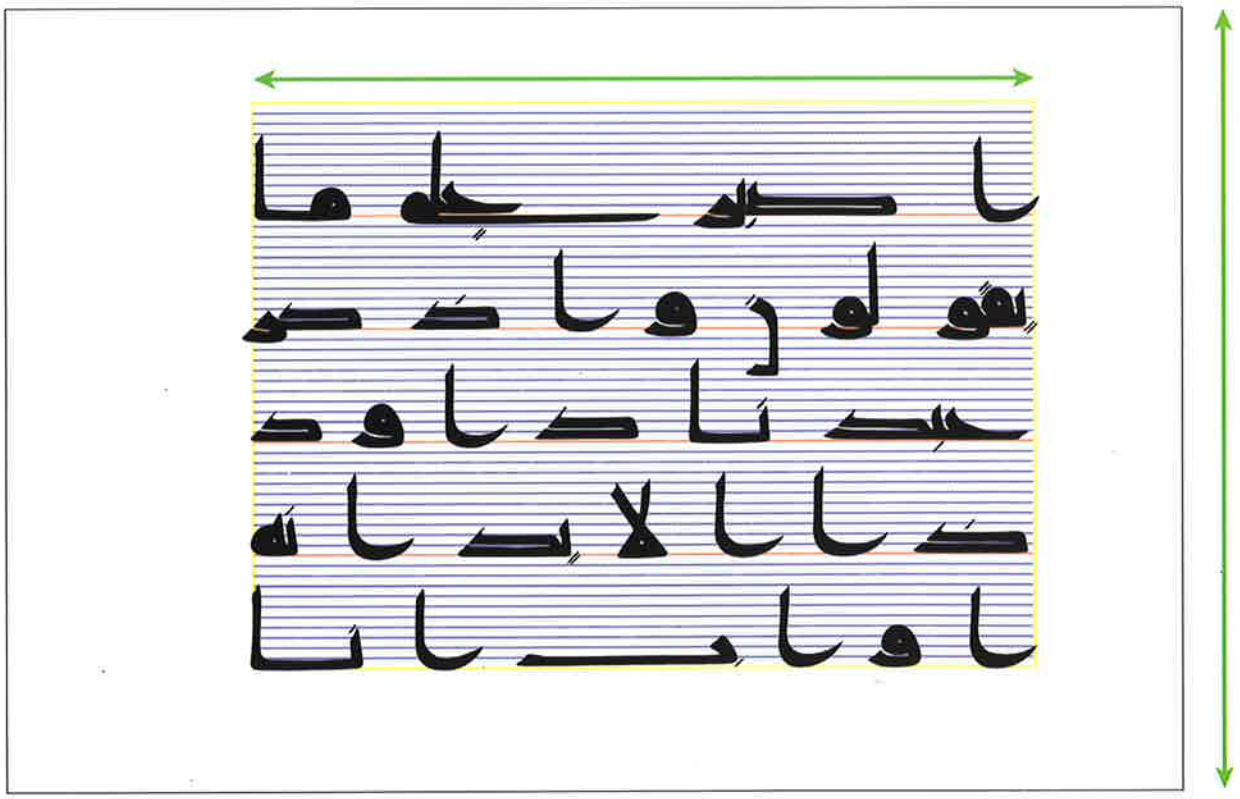
The text box of Kufic manuscripts was also laid out with a fixed

31. The interlines in the Qur'an of Amājūr (style D.I, written in or shortly before 876, 12.5 x 19.5 cm).

proportion of width to height, for instance $\sqrt{2}$, 3:2 or $\sqrt{3}$.[5] Once it had been chosen for a given manuscript, this proportion was scrupulously maintained by scribes, page after page. The precision achieved in practice is all the more remarkable because Kufic manuscripts were not ruled.[6] It was probably obtained by placing a template grid under each page while writing: one could imagine a wooden board with the layout drawn in ink. The parchment, as prepared at the peak of the tradition, was translucent enough to let such a grid show through.[7] Finally, although the original page dimensions were often altered through time by trimming and wear, it is probable that the text box's long side was made equal to the page's short side and that the page, in turn, had a constant ratio of width to height (Figure 32).[8]

Kufic, in sum, was built upon a geometrical expansion that linked its elements, from the thickness of the pen to the page, through a series of proportional relationships. In the same spirit, the art of illumination developed towards more and more abstract forms based on a geometrical grid of equal modular units, either square or rectangular.[9]

32. The geometry of the Kufic page.

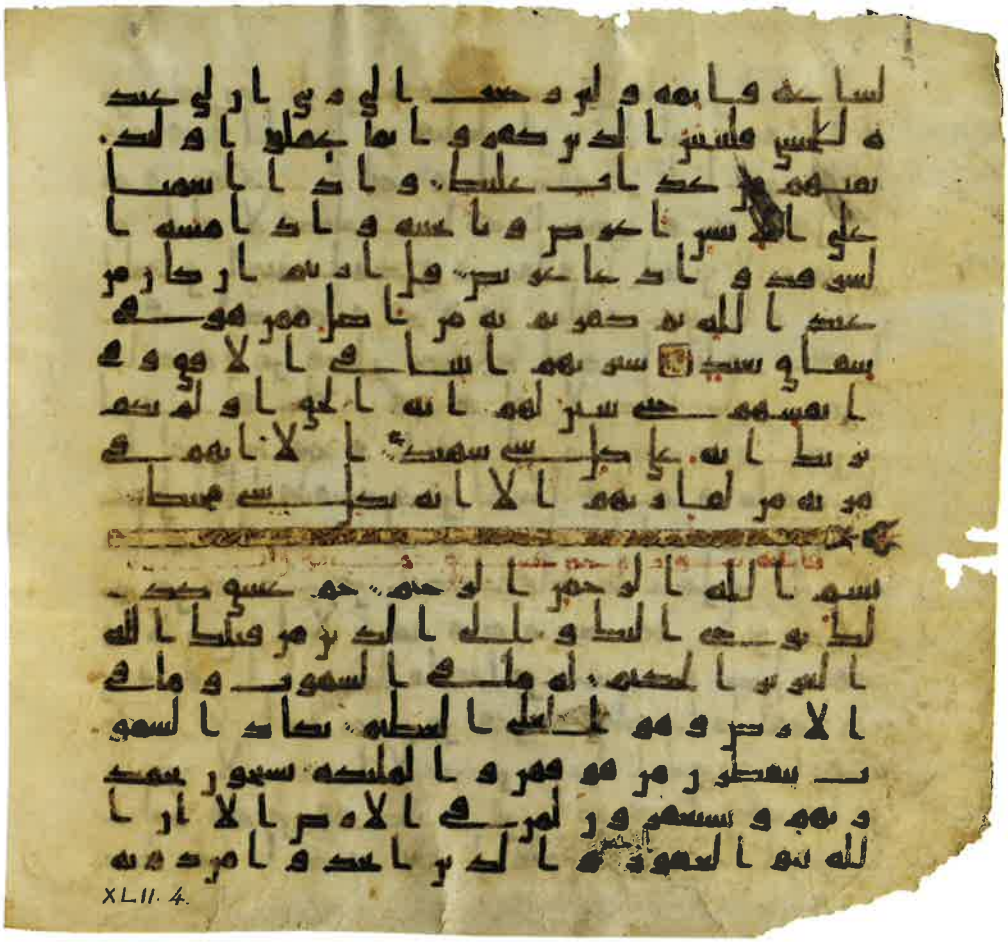


These features, which occur in even the earliest Kufic manuscripts, are a world away from the previous phase represented by Hijazi. Only a few of them can be traced back to earlier scribal traditions. In Kufic, the quires were universally quinions with hair facing flesh, as in Syriac.[10] The use of geometrical decoration in bands to mark the beginning of a new chapter was also a primarily Syriac usage before Islam.[11] While it is occasionally encountered in Hijazi, it became the norm, grew and improved in Kufic. Sometimes, a stylistic kinship is also apparent: for example, the sura markers with rope-and-pearl motifs encountered in some early Kufic Qur'ans have close Syriac equivalents – note, in Figure 33, the treatment of the surface and marginal flourishes.[12]

As already mentioned, it was common, in Syriac manuscripts of the sixth to seventh centuries, to write the title of each new chapter in red (Figure 34). In a few Hijazi examples, red sura titles can be noticed, but they are in a different script from the text and could be later additions.[13] At any rate, this type of title became frequent in Kufic styles B and C. The pen used is thinner than in the rest of the text, which makes it resemble Syriac headings (Figure 60). This relatively awkward feature would, in fact, be difficult to understand in the context of Kufic manuscripts' accomplished calligraphy and decoration, had it not been a legacy from earlier sources.

The interline system of Kufic, on the other hand, does not find a clear parallel in any earlier tradition. In Greek, Coptic and Christian Palestinian Aramaic, the body of the letters was sometimes encompassed by a (theoretical) median interline which bisected the area between two baselines.[14] This usage may have prefigured the codification of Kufic, but it is also much simpler. Similar remarks apply to layout. The Kufic text box partly resonates with the line-by-line ruling used in Greek, Coptic and CPA, but it also exhibits fundamentally novel features: the use of a constant text box proportion; the absence of visible ruling; and, in spite of this, the extremely precise justification of the lines, whereas they commonly fluctuated at the beginning and end in earlier traditions. The strokes of Kufic calligraphy are also markedly thicker than before. These differences all contribute to create a distinct visual impact of the page, to which we shall return.

In the end, the novelty of Kufic remains essentially unexplained by reference to earlier scribal traditions. Some of even the earliest Kufic manuscripts surpassed what had preceded them in visual harmony



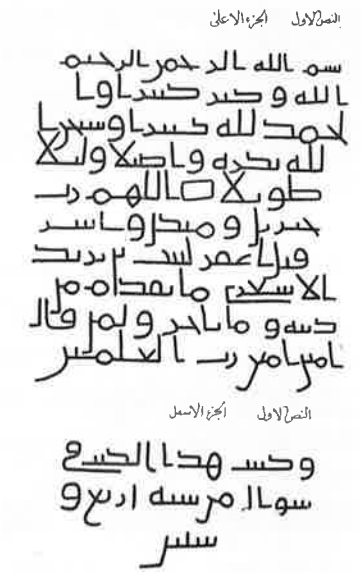
33. Kufic Qur'an in style B.Ib (BNF Arabe 327, 27 x 28 cm).

34. Syriac Bible from the Sinai collection (Syr.Ms.16, seventh century, 25 x 16.5 cm).

and geometrical rigour. Their uniformity in structure and writing suggests the conscious creation of a tradition. But when, and under what impetus? The answer to this question begins with the oldest surviving Islamic monument: the Dome of the Rock.

The inscriptions at the Dome of the Rock

The Dome of the Rock was built in 72/692 by the caliph 'Abd al-Malik (there has been some debate as to whether construction began or ended at that date).[15] It contains the earliest extant Arabic monumental inscription, marking a watershed in our documentation of the script. Shortly before then, the material record still suggests a relatively primitive approach to writing. We have already mentioned the Ṭā'if inscription of 678 and its kinship to Hijazi (Figure 12). In



the inscriptions from Khashna (dated 52/672, Figure 35) and Ḥafnat al-Abyaḍ (64/684, Figure 36), one can observe a move towards more geometrical letters forms: straighter lines and approximate circles, rectangles or triangles.[16] Even so, the script remains irregular in shape and size, and far removed from the interline codification of Kufic. Our evidence, however limited, suggests that the underlying reform of writing had not taken place by 684.[17]

35. (left) Inscription from Khashna (Hijaz, 52/672).

36. (right) Inscription from Ḥafnat al-Abyaḍ, near Karbalā' (Iraq, 64/684).

By contrast, the record clearly shows, at the Dome of the Rock, a dramatically transformed script. The mosaic inscription that runs around both sides of the inner octagon is a compilation of Qur'anic and non-Qur'anic passages that stress the oneness of God and the prophecy of Muḥammad, in an implicit refutation of Christian doctrines of the Holy Trinity. The original name of the founding caliph, 'Abd al-Malik, was replaced in the ninth century by that of his Abbasid successor, al-Ma'mūn (r. 813-33).[18] However, the foundation date (AH 72) has been left intact, which led Max van Berchem to see this as a gesture of symbolic appropriation rather than historical forgery (a change of foundation date would indeed have seemed absurd in contemporary eyes). A similar process has been repeated in the copper plaques which once stood above the north and east doors. The greater part of their text, written in elegant Kufic, consists of Qur'anic passages comparable to the above; but the last two lines, which are in a compressed, uneasy script, are in praise of al-Ma'mūn and his governor (Figure 37).[19] The joint between the original and added parts is still visible.

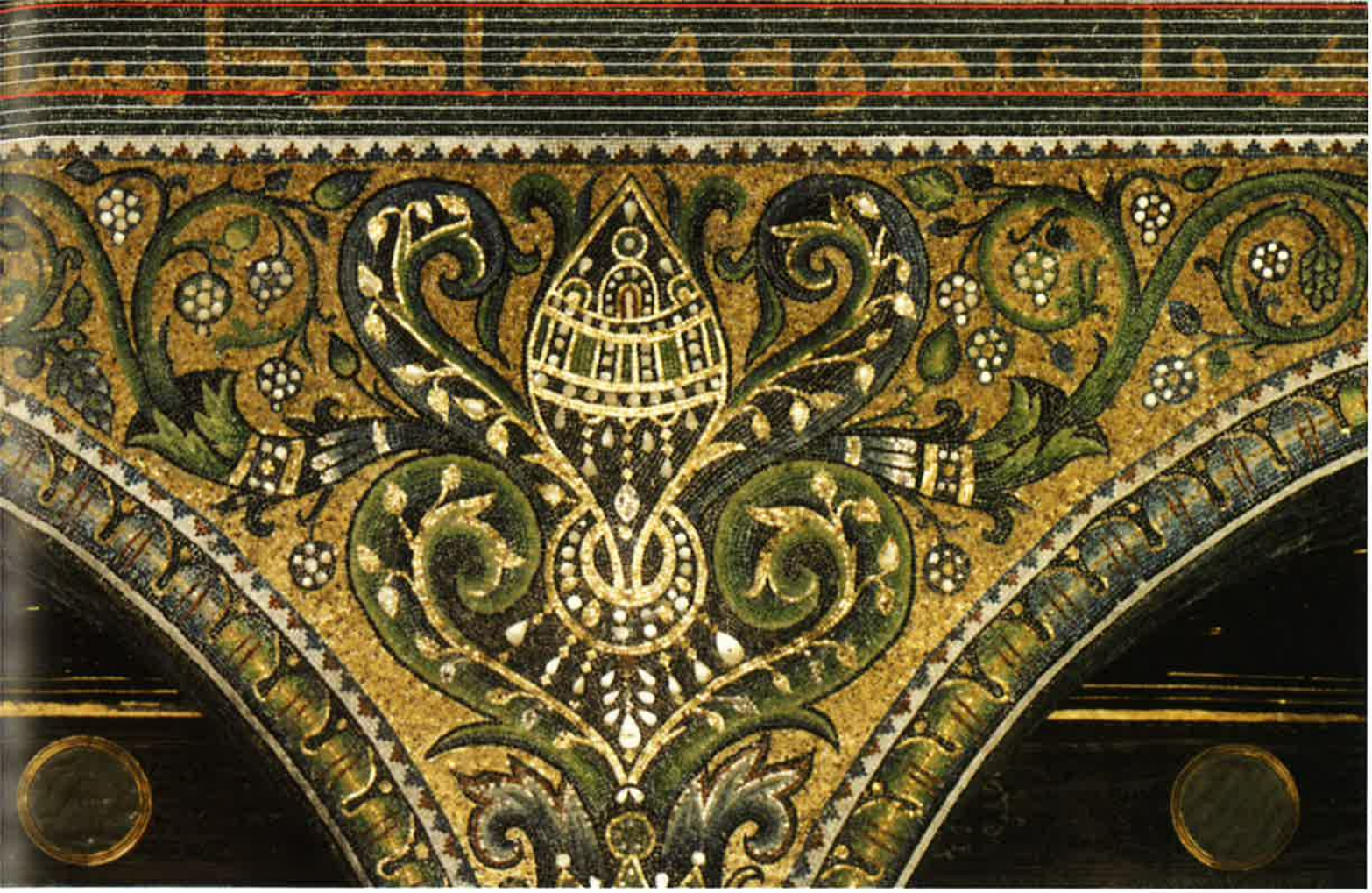
If we turn to the script of these texts, we note that the baselines of writing are almost perfectly straight and, where applicable, parallel and equidistant. By superimposing six equal interlines on each line of script, we define not only the thickness of the stroke (be it mosaic tesserae or engraved copper); but also the curves of each letter.

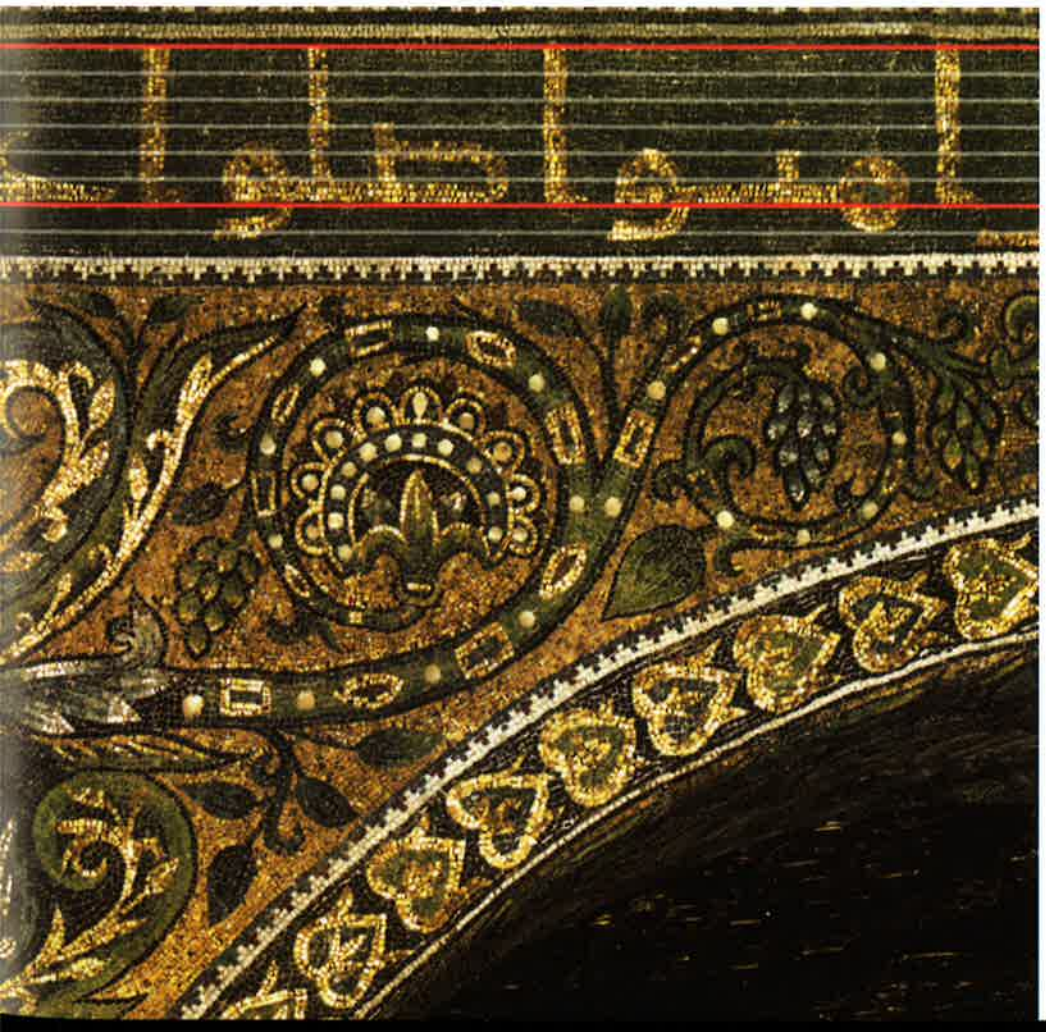
37. Copper plaque from the north door, Dome of Rock (Jerusalem, 72/692). The text was executed in repoussé and painted in gold on a blue ground.

The same grid applies to all parts of the inscriptions, except for the additions by al-Ma'mūn.[20] This shows that, by or shortly after 692, the Arabic script had been codified in the geometrical terms that remained at the basis of the Kufic tradition.

In the copper plaques, the letter shapes tend towards two basic elements: the straight line and the circle. The *alif* is four interlines high throughout, making its proportion to the line 6/4 = 3/2 (this is also true of *lām*, *kāf*, *ṭā'* and *ẓā'*). The only exception to this rule is the top line, where these letters all have a height of five interlines. This pattern might have been intentional, for it also occurs in early Qur'anic manuscripts.[21] In the rest of the text, the interlines are also used in a consistent manner: for example, the body of the elongated letters (such as *ṣād* and *kāf*) is two interlines high; the top of initial *'ayn*, medial *hā'* and of *wāw* is three interlines high; while the loop of final *qāf* extends two interlines below the baseline.

38. Mosaic inscription, Dome of the Rock (Jerusalem, 72/692). Part A.





39. (above) Mosaic inscription, Dome of the Rock (Jerusalem, 72/692). Part B.

40. Mosaic inscription, Dome of the Rock (Jerusalem, 72/692). Part C.

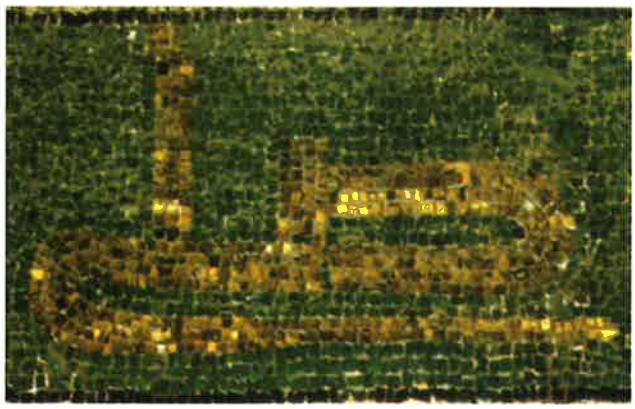
The mosaic inscription, with its combined length of some 240 metres, is of an altogether different scale.[22] Close observation reveals different patterns of writing between three of its parts:

> Part A: the outer side of the inscription.
> Part B: the south to southwest sections of the inner inscription.
> Part C: the northwest to southeast sections of the inner inscription.[23]

Disparities can be noted, first of all, in the way the letters adhere to the interlines. In part A, the construction of *ṣād/ḍād* and final *hā'* is as follows: first interline, horizontal stroke; second interline, void; third interline, horizontal stroke; fourth interline, top of vertical stroke (Figure 38). By contrast, in the rest of the inscription, the vertical stroke is much shorter: in part C, the whole letter is even sometimes compressed to make it fit, with this stroke, under the third interline (Figure 40). Furthermore, in A, the vertical stroke of medial *bā'/tā'/thā'* and the like is three to four interlines high; whereas in B and even more commonly in C, it varies between two and three interlines. While the interline grid is more closely followed in part A, its relatively supple rendition in B and C results in a more accomplished script.

These divergences are reflected in the techniques employed by the mosaicists.[24] In part A, the thickness of the stroke is regularly equal to five tesserae but in B, it fluctuates between four and five and in C, between three and four.[25] These fluctuations are partly balanced by the size of the tesserae, which gradually increases between parts A, B and C, so that the overall stroke width remains relatively regular.[26] Part C is set further apart by a distinctive brilliance: its gold tesserae were probably placed at a downward angle to the wall surface, which allowed them to reflect daylight in the direction of viewers at ground level.[27] While on the outer side (part A), simple successive rows of black and white lines frame the text, a triangular repeat pattern with four colours (black, white, but also green and red) has been used on the inner side (B and C). This distinction echoes the overall order of the decoration, which is relatively crude on the outer side and more refined on the inner side.[28]

These differences of execution suggest that two or three teams of mosaicists – who could have been masters and pupils from the same atelier – were at work on this project. Having each been assigned a



different part of the text, they responded to the same requirements, based on the same template, in slightly different ways.

The imprint of calligraphers can also be felt at varying degrees in the inscription. Throughout the text, the sharpened endings of some strokes seem to reproduce the movement of the calamus, for example in *alif maqṣūra* (Figure 41).[29]

A discrepancy can be noticed in the initial *'ayn*: in part A, its hook tends towards the strict form of a circle, as against a more indistinct

41. (above) The word 'ṣallā', with its tapering alif maqṣūra. (top) Part A. (bottom) Part C.

42. Initial 'ayn. (left) Part A. (right) Part C.

43. Examples of diacritical signs (part C).

curve in B and C (Figure 42). In A, its lower part often ends in a downward bevel which slices through the horizontal stroke; whereas in B and C, it merges into the latter stroke, which either finishes vertically or in an upward bevel. The shape observed in B and C more closely echoes the reality of reeds and manuscripts, where the hook is either oval or consists of two distinct strokes, and the lower bevel is vertical or points upwards.

Diacritical signs are almost nonexistent on the outer side of the inscription (part A) and the first sentence of its inner side (which belongs to B), but they become frequent in the remainder of that side (including the whole of part C).[30] These signs either consist of oblique dashes, ovoid dots, or an intermediary shape – that is, the forms encountered in Hijazi manuscripts (Figure 43). If the sloping dash is the most natural form to be obtained with a reed, the same could be said of the square or rectangle with tesserae. These dots and dashes, if anything, tend to disturb the natural flow of the design: their rationale does not belong to mosaic.

All these elements imply that Arabic calligraphers with a background close to Hijazi were at work, along with the mosaicists, on this inscription, particularly the inner side of the octagon. The higher standard of craftsmanship observed on that side, in both script

and mosaic technique, reflects the overall architectural scheme of the building, with its ritual focus on the sacred rock.[31]

In practice, the calligraphy was the first part of the inscription to be set, as revealed by the way the green tesserae follow the contours of the gold before merging into the ground.[32] Marguerite van Berchem has noted that the underdrawing was generally done in red for the gold and silver tesserae, as opposed to dark grey for the green and blue.[33] Because the mosaic is so well preserved, the layers of plaster that lie beneath it have not been fully documented. But what is known converges with observations made at the Great Mosque of Damascus and on a mosaic from the market of Baysān dating to the reign of Hishām (724-43) to show that Umayyad mosaicists followed regular Byzantine practice.[34] It is thus possible to tentatively reconstruct how the work was carried out.

At the outset, the walls were covered with a relatively thick layer of plaster, which primarily served to suppress irregularities of surface. Guidelines resembling the interlines may have been drawn or incised at this level. Their use was not systematic in the craft, but they are commonly attested for geometrical mosaics, where they acted as a template upon which the design was articulated.[35] At the Dome of the Rock, such guidelines could have considerably aided the craftsmen in ensuring the continuity of their two immensely long inscription bands. The next step was to gradually cover the first coating with a fine layer of adhesive plaster, the setting bed. This was added in small sections, day after day, so that the underdrawing could be painted and immediately executed with tesserae while the surface was still fresh.[36]

These technical aspects of the craft reveal the close collaboration that was required, for a work like this, between calligraphers and mosaicists, often standing side by side on the same scaffolding. While laying out such an enlarged script, a geometrical grid will have helped preserve the coherence of the design and have facilitated its execution, especially by craftsmen whose language was not Arabic. Indeed, the rationale that was placed at the heart of calligraphy – not only in this inscription, but in the Kufic tradition as a whole – mirrors that of mosaic, with its parallel rows of tesserae and underlying grids.[37] We may be close, here, to the context that led to the spectacular transformation of Arabic script.

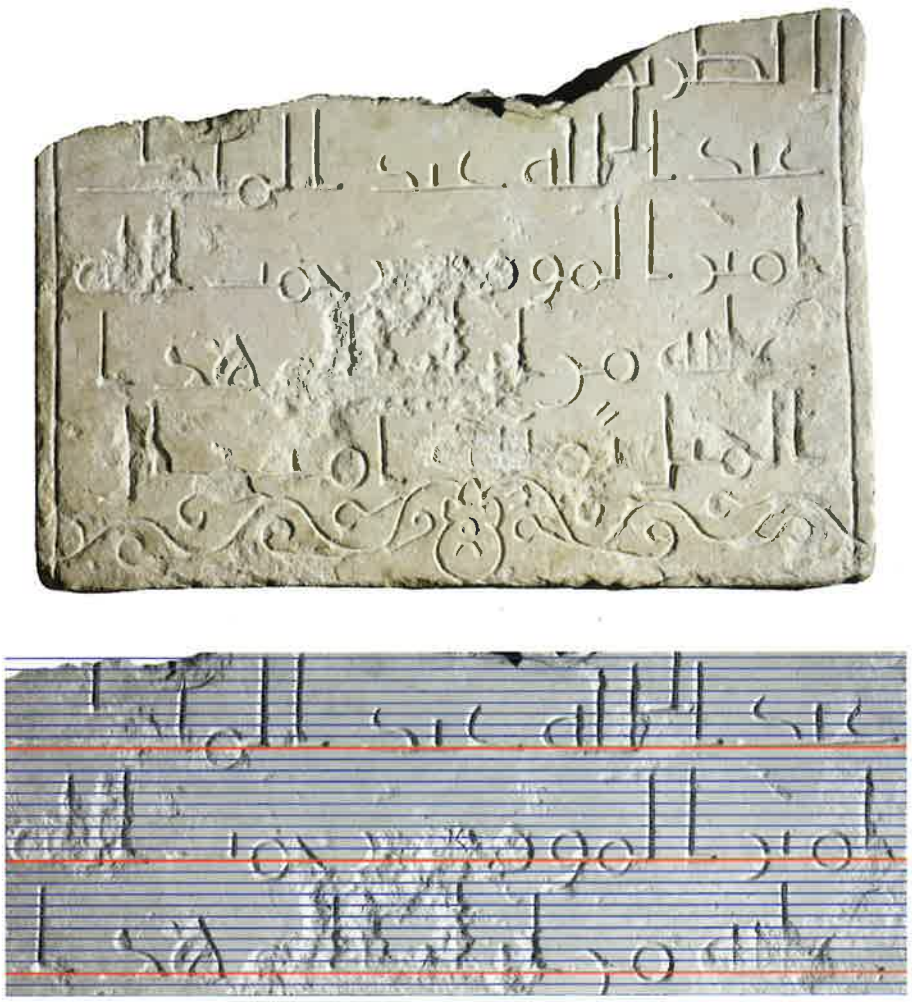
The Dome of the Rock represents the symbolic climax of ʿAbd al-Malik's state building programme. After or even during the war he waged against his rival Ibn Zubayr, he engaged in a vast effort to consolidate the Muslim polity.[38] First, the official language of the *dīwān* was changed, from Persian in the East and Greek in the West, to Arabic. This resulted in better control over the administration, where Muslims also began to replace non-Muslims. In the material record, we thus see bilingual papyri giving way to exclusively Arabic documents.[39]

Second, after numerous experiments, the gold and silver coinage underwent a revolutionary transformation, with the introduction of a purely epigraphic design in 77/697. Beyond a defiant gesture towards Byzantium, these coins represented a formidable vehicle of propagation for the basic precept of the new faith, engraved on their small surface: 'There is no God but God alone, He has no associate.' The standardization of coinage went along with a fiscal reform which moved away from tribute taking towards regular taxation.[40] In a gesture of territorial control, ʿAbd al-Malik also improved the road system of Syria and Palestine, as notably attested by milestones discovered in the region of Jerusalem and the Golan.

One essential idea underlies these various initiatives: the construction of a viable and strong state, able to control its territories and assert its distinctive religious identity in the midst of a predominantly Christian environment. But they also share a more concrete trait: their reliance on the Arabic script, whether for practical or symbolical purposes. Its codified form was thus consistently spread across different media during this period.

The milestones of ʿAbd al-Malik

Seven milestones dating to the reign of ʿAbd al-Malik's have been discovered to date. Two of them, found at Abū Ghūsh and Bāb al-Wādī, closely echo the copper plaques at the Dome of the Rock in their letter forms. They are articulated upon a ten-interline grid: we are clearly dealing, here, with a reformed version of the script (Figure 44).[41] At Bāb al-Wādī, the diacritical signs on the last line are also dashes, as in Kufic, rather than dots.[42] To this list can be added a third milestone from Khuzaybāʾ (only published as a squeeze) and a



44. Milestone of ʿAbd al-Malik (Bāb al-Wādī, 685-705).

fourth from ʿAyn Hemed (now very fragmentary).[43] A fifth milestone (Khān al-Ḥathrūra, Figure 45) is also based on the same codification, but more loosely applied: the tall letters tend to be slightly inclined, and the writing as a whole echoes manuscript calligraphy;[44] traces of preparatory lines that mark different horizontal levels in the script – a basic version of the interlines – can be seen. The five milestones from the region of Jerusalem also share the same wording, except that some indicate the distance to Damascus and others to Jerusalem: they thus form a coherent group, with small variations.

Two further milestones dated 85/704 have been found near the village of Fīq, in the Golan.[45] Also from Fīq is an inscription in the name of ʿAbd al-Malik dated 73/693 or 83/703, which commemorates a ground levelling.[46] The script of the three Golan inscriptions is more primitive than in the Jerusalem group, recalling the earlier

45. Milestone of ʿAbd al-Malik (Khān al-Ḥathrūra, 685-705).

text from Khashna (Figure 46). This could reflect either a lower rank of patronage (and the work of non-professional engravers), or a chronological evolution from one group to the other.

The latter possibility has been defended by Amikam Elad, who noted several differences in wording between the two sets of milestones.[47] Most remarkably, whereas an explicit date is given in the Golan, the name "Abd al-Malik' is simply followed by the phrase '*raḥmat allāh ʿalayh*' ('God's mercy be upon him') in the Jerusalem group. In classical Islam, such a formula would have been funerary, which led Elad to think that the caliph had recently died at the time.[48] This would place the date of the Jerusalem milestones in or shortly after 86/705. But it presupposes that the formula had already acquired this connotation in the early Umayyad period, an idea that still requires confirmation.[49] In either case, the reformed script was applied to the milestones during or immediately after the reign of ʿAbd al-Malik.

The epigraphic coinage

Coins, by their very scale (about 3 cm in diameter), stand in the sharpest possible contrast to monumental inscriptions, yet they are also precious documents of the script's evolution. As already mentioned, a purely epigraphic design was introduced in gold coinage by ʿAbd al-Malik in 77/697, then in silver from 78/698. Although the gold *dīnār*s carry no mint names, it is thought that they were all produced at Damascus in the Umayyad period.[50]

The production of silver *dirham*s was decentralized until 84/703,[51] with more than forty active mints. There followed, in 85-9/704-8, a period of centralization when they were only produced at Damascus, Wāsiṭ and a peripatetic mint in the northern provinces. The provincial mints resumed operation in 90/709.[52]

46. (above) Milestone of ʿAbd al-Malik (Fīq, 704). The original stone slab, of which only half survives, had an elongated format.

47. Epigraphic gold dīnār struck in 77/697, probably at the mint of Damascus.

In 85-6/704-5, an improved design was introduced at Wāsiṭ (Table 2). On the obverse, the size of the circles around the field was increased in order to create more space for the central text. The most important innovation lay in the script itself. Until 85, the execution recalls freehand writing, with relatively irregular strokes that tend to curve slightly. By 86, the letter strokes had become perfectly straight, with curves tending towards geometrical circularity.[53] By contrast with earlier issues, these coins give the impression of a sharp horizontal levelling of the script. Close observation reveals that the letters follow, with slight variations, a sixfold interline grid on the obverse, which

Mint	Year (AH)	Obverse	Reverse
Wāsiṭ	85		
Wāsiṭ	86		
Damascus	86		
Damascus	98		

Table 2. Umayyad issues of silver coinage at Wāsiṭ and Damascus.

becomes threefold on the reverse, probably as a result of the latter's smaller lines (Figure 48).[54] A reformed version of the script was, in other words, introduced in the silver coinage at Wāsiṭ between 85 and 86.

The reduction of the design to this scale would have required minute engraving of the dies on which the metal was struck.[55] This technical prowess is not entirely surprising: fine figurative compositions had been executed on coins since Antiquity and were still produced in the early decades of Islam, notably in the eastern provinces (see, for example, Figure 59).[56] On the reformed epigraphic *dirhams* themselves, the engravers were also able to create a succession of perfectly circular plain and void concentric rings whose thickness is comparable to the interline height.

The new design, which is attested solely at Wāsiṭ until 89/708, suddenly spread to the eastern provinces in 90/709.[57] The contrast is particularly sharp in some Iranian mints, like Merv, where earlier epigraphic issues had retained a distinctive roundedness inherited from Pahlavi, which was at once severed (Figure 49). Interestingly, although they are all based on the same model, the new issues are

48. (above) The interlines on a dirham minted at Wāsiṭ in 86/705.

49. Epigraphic dirhams from Merv. (left) 84/703. (right) 90/709.

not strictly identical, which suggests that their dies may have been engraved locally.[58]

An altogether different path was followed at the capital mint, Damascus, where a distinct style with rounded letter endings was belatedly developed from around 98/717 (Table 2).[59] This Damascene style remained essentially unchanged until the end of the Umayyad period, but it was not adopted elsewhere, except sporadically in the West. On the contrary, from 105/724 onwards, the western mints of Ifrīqiya, al-Andalus and the northern mints of Armīniya then al-Bāb began to move, one after the other, towards variations on the Wāsiṭī model, leaving Damascus alone out of this trend.[60] Wāsiṭ thus emerged as an avant-garde post for the design of epigraphic coinage between 704 and 705.

The city had been founded only a few years earlier by al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf al-Thaqafī, the Umayyad governor of Iraq (694-714).[61] Al-Ḥajjāj had been actively involved in ʿAbd al-Malik's state-building programme, notably the spread to Iraq of the epigraphic coinage initially introduced at Damascus. He appears, between the very end of latter's reign and the beginning of al-Walīd's, to have played a leading role in the adaptation of the reformed script to coinage.

Umayyad manuscripts of the Qur'an

The centralization, standardization and spread of coin issues, in fact, recalls the movement from the diversity of Hijazi to the structural uniformity of Kufic. At the beginning of his chapter on calligraphy, al-Nadīm writes:

> The first person to write Qur'anic manuscripts in the early days and to be known for the beauty of his calligraphy was Khālid ibn Abī al-Hayyāj, and I have seen a Qur'an in his own hand. Saʿd chose him to write copies of the Qur'an, poetry and reports for al-Walīd ibn ʿAbd al-Malik. He is the one who wrote in gold the inscription which is in the *qibla* of the Prophet's mosque, peace be upon him, from *'al-shams wa ḍuḥāhā'* until the end of the Qur'an. It is said that ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz said to him: 'I want you to write me a manuscript on this model.' So he wrote it and decorated it, and ʿUmar started to look over it and admire it, but its price was too high, so he returned it.[62]

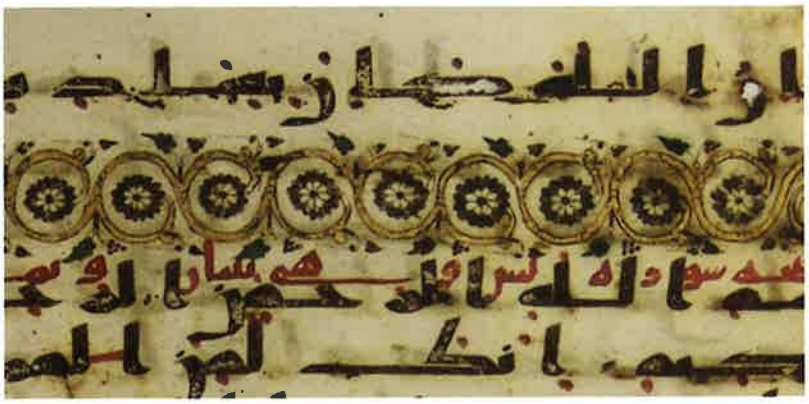
'Abd al-Malik's son and successor, al-Walīd (r. 705-15), ordered the rebuilding of the Prophet's mosque at Medina around 706. The work was carried out by his governor of the city, 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz (who would reign as caliph between 717 and 720). Like the Dome of the Rock and the Great Mosque of Damascus, the building was adorned with an inscription in gold mosaic.[63] Although Nadīm's account cannot be taken word for word,[64] it suggests that the calligraphers who worked on these projects came to produce, under Umayyad patronage, Qur'anic manuscripts *based on the same model,* which they also *decorated.* This idea finds a clear resonance in the material record.

A first stage of the underlying transformation is heralded by 'Marcel 13' (Saint Petersburg), a manuscript found in the nineteenth century at the Mosque of 'Amr (Fustat) by Jean-Joseph Marcel and recently rediscovered by Déroche.[65] The surviving folios (now 37 x 31 cm) represent one-quarter of the whole Qur'an, an unusually large fragment for this period. The script indicates that, as at the Dome of the Rock, we are lying but one small step ahead of Hijazi. Being based on a loose and probably early version of the interline system, the calligraphy is more angular than Hijazi, yet more curvilinear than Kufic (Figure 50).[66] The upright strokes have a tendency to slightly slant to the right, as if a scribe accustomed to Hijazi had been trying to write them. But as in Kufic, the letters follow precise definitions also shared by at least two other manuscripts: Arabe 330c (BNF), which is of comparable size, and the smaller Umayyad Qur'an of Damascus (TIEM ŞE321).[67]

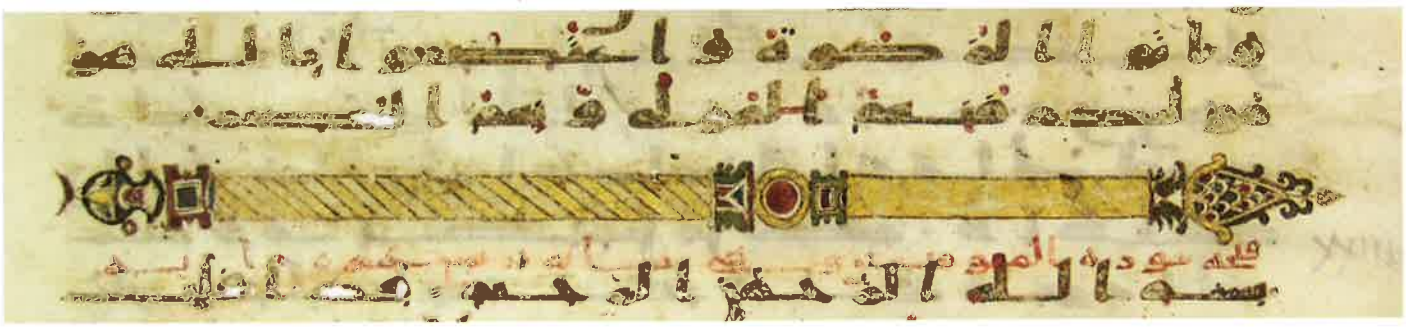
In these manuscripts, the diacritical signs are no longer ovoid dots, but dashes that tend to be slightly thickened. Red dots indicate the vocalization in a manner that would become the norm in Kufic: above the line for short 'a' *(fatḥa);* at the level of the line for short 'u' *(ḍamma*); and below it for short 'i' *(kasra);* pairs of red dots in the same positions also mark the indefinite case ending *(tanwīn).*[68] The notation of medial *alif* is more complete than in Hijazi, but less so than in classical Kufic.[69]

The layout, likewise, directly prefigures Kufic. There is no ruling, yet the attention devoted to the text box is revealed by the use of line-end fillers and elongation to justify the lines. Both Marcel 13 and Arabe 330c have twenty-five parallel and equidistant lines

50. Marcel 13. Early Umayyad Qur'an discovered in Fustat in the nineteenth century (37 x 31 cm).



51. Decoration of Marcel 13 and the Dome of the Rock.



throughout, whereas they vary slightly in number in the Damascus Qur'an.[70] The quires, where they can be reconstructed, originally consisted of quinions arranged with hair facing flesh, as in Kufic.[71] This group of manuscripts thus represents, in every sense of the word, the root stage of the Kufic tradition, still permeated by Hijazi, yet in the process of establishing new norms.

An indication of provenance may be derived from the text of Marcel 13. According to Islamic tradition, after the first 'Uthmānic codex was collected in Medina, it was copied and sent to the major cities of the empire: Mecca, Kufa, Basra and Damascus. But minor variants subsisted between the five codices, with the result that different schools developed in these cities, which also had different verse counts. Historically, from the ninth century onwards, variations of these two types have been recorded and ascribed to the above cities by several authors.[72] The geographical divisions suggested by these sources find a confirmation in Marcel 13, which consistently follows one tradition – that of Damascus – in respect to both variants and verse counts.[73] This raises the possibility of a production in greater Syria, an idea which also finds a resonance in the decoration.

The three manuscripts are adorned, at the beginning of some suras, by horizontal ornamental bands which are almost literal citations of the mosaics at the Dome of the Rock. In Marcel 13, they are particularly refined: a close parallel with the monument can be noted in the cornucopiae with their scrolling vines, the multi-coloured polygonal designs with little spikes also framed in vines, the small protruding leaves and clusters of grapes, the rounded vases with two handles from which plants expand or the pointed semi-abstract vegetal motif topped by a smaller motif of the same shape (Figure 51).[74]

Similar observations can be extended to the illumination of Arabe 330c and the Damascus Qur'an.[75] The three manuscripts also share a distinctive final *lām*, *yā'*, *qāf* and *kāf* which find their closest parallel at the same monument and in the milestones of 'Abd al-Malik.[76] Taken as a whole, the underlying combination of script and decoration directly mirrors that at the Dome of the Rock. If the calligraphers involved at the monument also wrote Qur'anic manuscripts, they would have looked like these: Marcel 13 and its sister manuscripts are likely to be products of 'Abd al-Malik's scribal programmes.

This idea is reinforced by their stylistic anteriority to a second key witness of the underlying evolution: the famous Umayyad Qur'an from Sanaa. This manuscript has been scientifically dated to the turn of the eighth century: a radiocarbon analysis has pointed to a key period between AD 657 and 690,[77] and an unpublished chemical test has suggested a date between 700 and 730.[78] This broad time range, between the late seventh and early eighth century, is consistent with its script and decoration.

52. Sanaa Qur'an. Verso of the third illumination (beginning of the Qur'an, Sūrat al-fātiḥa).

53. Sanaa Qur'an. Third illumination.

Whereas Marcel 13 still had transitory features inherited from Hijazi, the Sanaa Qur'an is fully anchored in the Kufic tradition. Its calligraphy is typical of style C.Ia, with a remarkably regular pattern of interline use.[79] The sharp, slightly forced angularity of the letters might reflect a recent codification. There are red vocalization dots, thin diacritical dashes and the text box is strictly built upon proportional principles.[80] The illumination is spectacular. It consists of three full pages which originally opened the book, immediately followed by the beginning of the Qur'anic text (they are shown backwards from page 82, in the order of the Arabic manuscript).

On the first page (Figure 55) is a circle framed by a double square, with trees. By flipping over this page, the reader discovers

two extremely refined depictions of monuments, flattened at ground level into the form of a square (Figures 53, 54). These two images are explicitly architectural: the arches are round and, on the right-hand side, they stand on two levels, as at the Great Mosque of Damascus. Their texture, like that of the illumination in the text, consists of geometrically organized vegetal motifs reminiscent of Umayyad art, be it at Damascus, the Dome of the Rock, the Aqṣā or the desert

54. Sanaa Qur'an. Second illumination (verso of opening page).

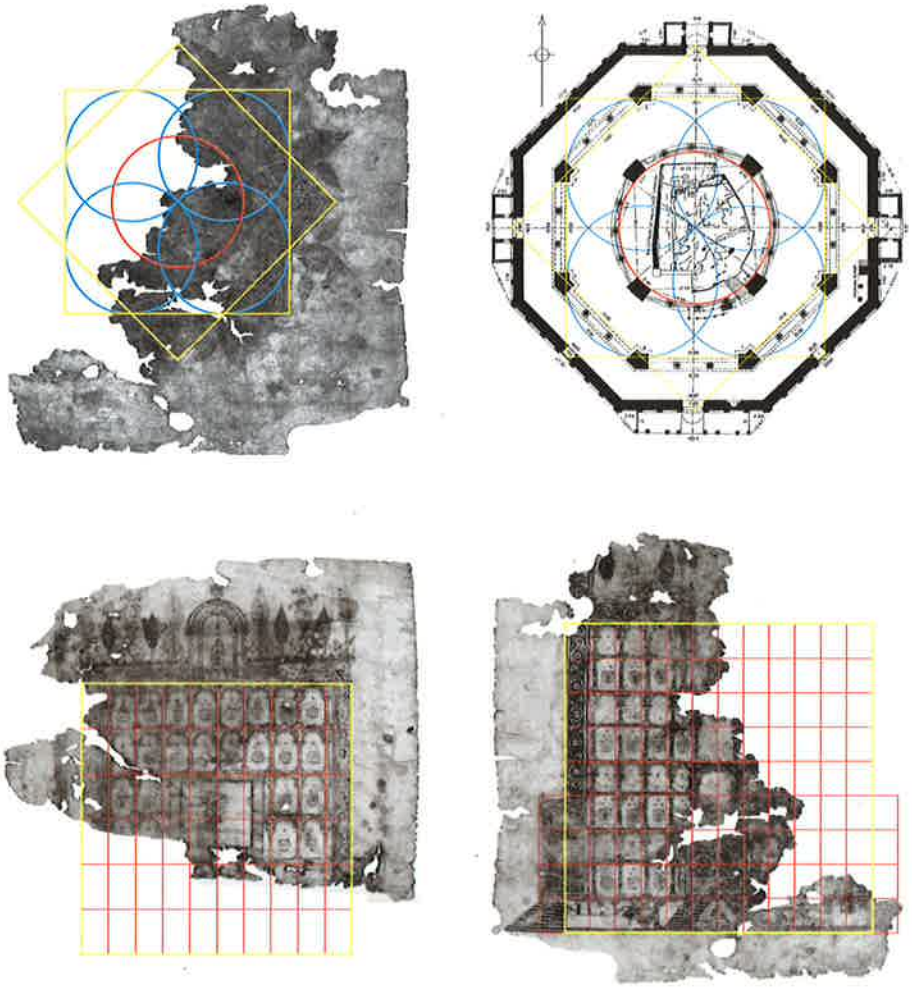
55. Sanaa Qur'an. Opening page – first illumination.

castles.[81] As in other Umayyad art, the semiotics of style have been transformed: whereas in Late Antique manuscripts, architecture formed a backdrop to the text or figural painting, here it has become the main decorative theme.[82] Grids of vertical rectangles define the practical articulation of the design (Figure 56).

The two square buildings face each other, conveying an implicit meaning. Several features reveal that they are mosques. On the right-hand side, we see a nave leading to a pulpit, the *minbar*, and ending in

a prayer niche, the *miḥrāb*. The large vase by the central double gate could be linked to ritual ablutions. On the top right-hand corner is also a tower with a flight of steps, the minaret.[83]

The axial nave was probably introduced into mosque architecture under al-Walīd: the manuscript is thus unlikely to be earlier than his reign. Al-Walīd's mosques of Damascus and Medina also had four minarets, which were a distinguishing, if not unique, feature in this period. At Medina they were built with the mosque, whereas in Damascus they were inherited from the Roman *temenos*.[84] These towers were located, as in the illumination, at the corners of their respective buildings. Of these two monuments, only the mosque of Damascus had a wide axial nave, so our first image may contain a reference its prayer hall.[85]



56. Sanaa Qur'an. Geometrical structure of the illumination.

The building on the left side of the double-page spread (Figure 53) has an inner courtyard with a column or pedestal holding a flower vase, but no axial nave, minaret or pulpit. The niche at the top closely echoes that on the facing page, which implies that this is also a mosque (the hanging lamps, presumably mosque lamps, are also the same across both pages). The lack of more specific features makes it inherently difficult to relate to a known model.[86]

The opening page presents a more abstract type of decoration, but one which turns out to be based on the same figure as the ground plan of the Dome of the Rock (Figure 56). This figure, the double square with circle, was also common in Late Antique decoration, especially mosaic; and it occurs in some later, completely abstract, Kufic frontispieces.[87] Is it purely decorative in the Sanaa Qur'an, or does it contain a more concrete reference? Across all three illuminations are slender trees carrying fruit, as well as vine scrolls. Their style recalls the mosaics at the Great Mosque of Damascus,[88] which might again suggest an affinity with the reign of al-Walīd. Ibn Jubayr, who visited the Mosque of Medina in 1184, also reports that its mosaics contained 'depictions of different types of trees, their branches loaded with fruit.'[89] In the Qur'an, paradise is repeatedly depicted as a garden abounding in fertile trees and gushing water. For instance:

> Such as fears the Station of his Lord, for them shall be two gardens
> O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?
> Abounding in branches
> O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?
> Therein two fountains of running water
> O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?
> Therein of every fruit two kinds
> O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ...
> And besides these shall be two gardens
> O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny? ...
> Therein fruits, and palm-trees and pomegranates
>
> *Excerpts from Qur'an LV, 46-68 (trans. A.J. Arberry)*

In the two square buildings, the trees lie at the back of the *qibla* wall, towards which prayer was directed. In Antiquity, the dome was also a symbol of the heavens. Shortly before 536, Choricius could thus

write about the church of Saint Sergius at Gaza (like the Dome of the Rock, a domed octagonal building):

> To gaze up at it, you will require a neck accustomed to stretching upward, so high is the roof above the ground, and with good reason, since it imitates the visible heaven.[90]

A Syriac hymn written in the sixth century for the cathedral of Edessa (another domed octagonal building) also proclaims:

> It is an admirable thing that in its smallness
> it should resemble the great world
> Not in size but in type ...
> Its ceiling is stretched like the heavens ...
> And furthermore it is adorned with golden mosaic,
> as the firmament is with shining stars.
> Its high dome is comparable to the heaven of heavens ...
> Exalted are the mysteries of this Temple concerning the heavens
> and the earth: in it they are represented schematically.[91]

In the opening illumination, the trees stem from the central circle, whereas they would have shown more clearly if rooted in the double square. Their position appears to reflect the paradisial symbolism of the trees and dome, echoed by that of the *qibla* in the other pages. The texture of the double square is the same as in the mosque walls overleaf so that it, too, probably represents a wall. Although it is less explicit than the others, this page may thus point to another actual building: the Dome of the Rock. As at the Dome of the Rock, each large fruit tree is surrounded by two smaller ones that stem from the same trunk.[92] Taken as a whole, the illuminations of the Sanaa Qur'an combine two layers of meaning with remarkable subtlety: the decorative themes, backed by concrete details, are a celebration of Umayyad religious architecture, while the latter's symbolism is also transposed to the page.

The wealth, refinement and massive format (originally at least 51 x 47 cm) of the Sanaa Qur'an suggest a patron of the highest rank.[93] In previous centuries, the canon tables that opened Greek and Syriac liturgical manuscripts had been framed in architectural motifs. These manuscripts were part of the ritual and iconography of their religious buildings which, in turn, they mirrored in their

pages. The Sanaa manuscript was, in all likelihood, illuminated by outstanding artisans trained in Byzantine (or Syriac) scriptoria, and it may likewise have been intended for use in a mosque. This is called to mind by its physical features, and also finds a resonance in texts. Al-Samhūdī (d. 1506) records this passage given by Ibn Zabāla (d. early ninth century) on the authority of his teacher, the famous jurist Mālik ibn Anas (d. 796):

> Al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf sent *maṣāḥif* to the capital cities *(ummahāt al-qurā).* He sent a large one to Medina, and he was the first to send *maṣāḥif* to the cities. This *muṣḥaf* was in a box *(ṣandūq)* on the right-hand side of the column *(usṭuwāna)* that was made to indicate the tomb of the Prophet, peace be upon him. It would be opened on Friday and Thursday, and people would recite from it for the morning prayer.[94]

In a different *khabar,* Mālik asserts that the use of Qur'ans for recitation at the mosque was introduced by al-Ḥajjāj.[95] The numismatic evidence has already pointed to Wāsiṭ, rather than Damascus, as the key centre for the diffusion of the reformed script for coinage. It is conceivable that the governor of Iraq also played a significant role in the evolution of Qur'anic manuscripts. A second early source, Ibn Shabbah (d. 878) thus states that al-Ḥajjāj 'wrote *maṣaḥif* and sent one to Medina.'[96] A fourteenth-century historian, Ibn Duqmāq, also writes about a famous Cairene manuscript known in his day as the 'Qur'an of Asmā'':

> The reason why this *muṣḥaf* was written is that al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf al-Thaqafī wrote *maṣāḥif* and sent them to the *amṣār* [military capitals], and one of them was sent to Egypt. This caused the anger of 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Marwān, who was then governor of Egypt for his brother 'Abd al-Malik. He said: 'He sends a *muṣḥaf* to a *jund* [military district] where I reside!' So he commissioned the *muṣḥaf* which is still in the mosque today.[97]

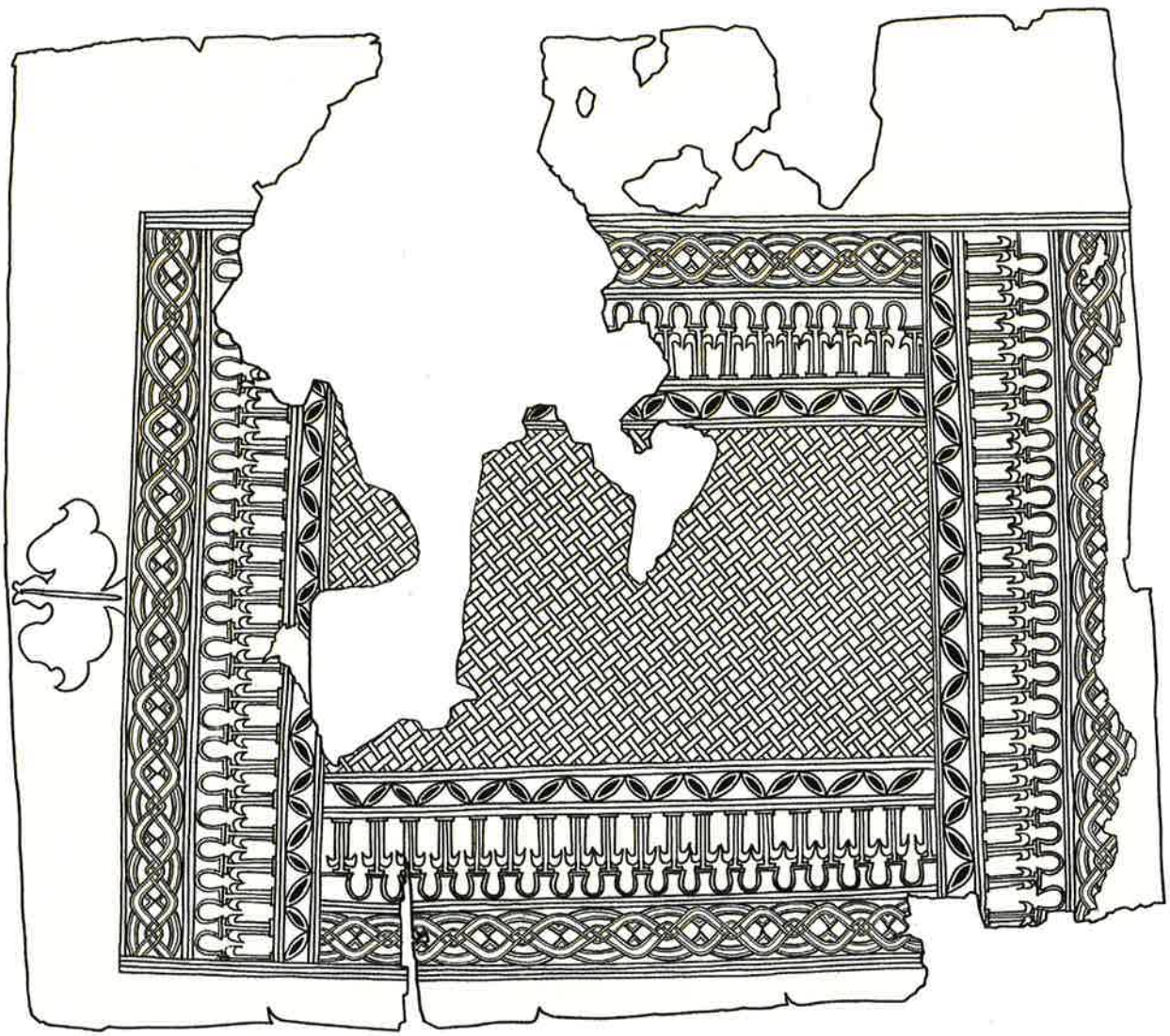
Ibn Duqmāq does not give the source for this account, though he has generally been noted for the seriousness of his documentation.[98] Like Mālik before him, he refers to the ritual function of the manuscript: 'It used to be carried from the palace of 'Abd al-'Azīz to the mosque every Friday morning and read, then returned to its place.'[99]

The exceptional character of the Sanaa Qur'an should not conceal the fact that it belongs to a larger scriptural group. At least four comparable manuscripts in style C.Ia have been published.[100] Like it, they are vertical, of very large size (about 40 x 30 to 50 x 40 cm), with the same number of lines (twenty in all five cases) and frequent rectangular text frames (a feature which is otherwise rare, especially in early Kufic). A giant codex in the same style, which may be slightly later, also contains rows of arches in its decoration bands (Figure 57).[101] Even more remarkable is a Qur'an in style C.II where the full-page illumination is framed by four rows of horseshoe arches (Figure

57. Giant Qur'an in style C.Ia (BNF Arabe 324c, 53.7 x 62 cm).

58).[102] As in the Sanaa manuscript, this architectural decoration has been flattened into the form of a square, but here the ground and border are ornamented with geometrical patterns: at this stage of evolution, the limit between the concrete and the abstract had become blurred, before the latter completely prevailed in C.III and D. Since this type of illumination is not unique to the Sanaa Qur'an, it is probable that others from the same group initially carried full-page architectural illuminations.

Despite an unrivalled wealth of execution, this manuscript thus remains consistent with a family of large manuscripts reflecting a



58. Illumination of a Qur'an in style C.II with architectural and abstract motifs (21 x 29.2 cm).

high level of patronage.[103] Their production may have begun with ʿAbd al-Malik, al-Ḥajjāj and al-Walīd, but it was probably taken over by other members of the Umayyad ruling elite. A variety of patrons is suggested by the number of these manuscripts that survive, and also by the aforementioned accounts of Ibn Duqmāq and al-Nadīm involving ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn Marwān and his son ʿUmar. One can also note this testimony from al-Dānī (982-1053):

> I have seen *(waṣala ilayya)* an old mosque Qur'an *(muṣḥaf jāmiʿ ʿatīq)* written at the beginning of the caliphate of Hishām ibn ʿAbd al-Malik in the year 110 – the date was written at the end where it said 'This was written by Mughīra ibn Mīnā in *rajab* of the year 110 [October–November, AD 728].' The vowels, *hamza*s, *tanwīn* and *tashdīd* were all marked by red dots, as we have related was the practice of early vocalizers in the East.[104]

This 'mosque Qur'an' from the reign of Hishām may well have been of the kind evoked above.

Economy and ideology in early Kufic

Spectacular as they were, the experiments of the Umayyads with script and scripture were almost bound to elicit a conservative reaction. Shortly before the introduction of the epigraphic *dīnār*, in 76/696 and 77/697, al-Ḥajjāj had minted an issue of silver Arab-Sasanian coins to which he added the words 'In the name of God – There is no God but God – Muḥammad is the messenger of God' around the obverse and his name in the central field (Figure 59).[105]

According to al-Balādhurī (d. 892), these coins became known as *makrūha* ('reproved', 'detested') either because they provoked the condemnation of religious scholars (the *fuqahā'*, also referred to as

59. Silver coin from Bīshāpūr (Iran, 77/697).

'ulamā'); or because their lighter weight standard was resented by non-Arabs.[106] Similar reports are given by two later historians, al-Māwardī (d. 1058) and Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1233), who explain that the *'ulamā'* rejected the new coins because Qur'anic verses were inscribed on them while they might be handled by the ritually impure.[107] For the same reason, the earliest epigraphic *dīnār*s may also have been called *'makrūha'*, though the formulation used by Balādhurī is ambiguous in this respect.[108]

In a letter attributed to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (*c.* 642-728), a famous preacher, 'Abd al-Malik is also criticized in these terms for his attitude towards the Qur'anic text: 'The book of God, O Commander of the faithful, has been revealed in its proper places; do not alter it or interpret it falsely.' [109] Several oral traditions recorded by Ibn Abī Dāwūd (844-929) suggest that religious scholars of the early period rejected the adornment of the Qur'an with gold and silver, the habit

60. Qur'an in style B.II, with sura title in red ink (Khalili QUR48, 11 x 17.8 cm).

of placing the manuscripts in the *qibla* of mosques, and possibly the notation of short vowels.[110] But given their mode of transmission and their contradictions, these accounts require to be handled with caution.[111] At any rate, the underlying orientation is confirmed by Mālik ibn Anas, who forbade the use of gold, the embellishment of the Qur'anic text and the use of Qur'anic manuscripts for recitation at the mosque, attributing the latter innovation to al-Ḥajjāj.[112] These proscriptions seem directly contradicted by Qur'ans in style C, their rich illumination and their ties with architecture.

As we have seen earlier, two other early Kufic styles – B.I and B.II – had also begun to develop by the early eighth century. Their lifespan was relatively long. One massive manuscript in B.II has been carbon-dated to around the eighth century.[113] Two others carry, in their margins, the record of births that happened between 843 and 863, which shows that they were already in existence by those dates. A third Qur'an in the same style is also preserved with a *waqfiyya* of 884, but this document, again, only indicates the latest date at which it may have been written, its *terminus ante quem.*[114] One other aspect of B.II seems to confirm that it was still written in the ninth century: the frequent occurrence of sura titles in golden D.I (the typical script of that period). In manuscripts that exhibit this feature, the verse markers and decorative roundels are also reminiscent of D.I.[115]

Let us, for the time being, concentrate on those items which, being devoid of either type of decoration, are most likely to represent the earlier phase of this development. Their verse markers are either nonexistent or very modest: typically, a hand-drawn circle containing a simple motif.[116] The beginning of a new sura is normally marked just by a title in red ink (Figure 60) though simple decorative motifs sometimes occur (Figure 61). The use of gold is extremely rare.[117] Whereas manuscripts in C.I were vertical, those in B.Ib are more frequently square or oblong, before the latter format completely prevailed in B.II. Page size was small in B.II (generally between 15 x 20 and 20 x 25 cm) and larger in B.Ib (about 25 x 30 cm), but still less so than in C.

The relative simplicity of this stylistic group contrasts with the wealth observed in C. This difference could be related to patronage: official manuscripts on the one hand, copies produced for private use or small religious institutions on the other. The few preserved Hijazi

61. Decoration from two Kufic Qur'ans in style B.I. (top) Khalili KFQ50, total page size 14.2 x 16.5 cm. (bottom) KFQ27, total page size 47 x 33 cm.

fragments in horizontal format support this idea, as they tend to be of relatively small size (around 10 x 20 cm). But economic constraints do not suffice to explain the sobriety that is often observed in practice, since more elaborate decoration could still have been attempted, even with lesser means. Some of these small, austere Qur'ans probably reflect the ethos of religiously conservative circles.

Another expression of this trend may be observed in two fragments, BNF Arabe 326a and Khalili KFQ34, which may originally have belonged to the same manuscript.[118] Both of them are written in an antiquated Hijazi style resembling that of Arabe 328a, whilst their geometrical layout, oblong format and horizontal levelling of the script are typical of Kufic (compare Figure 20 and Figure 62).[119] Together with the complete absence of vocalization and colour, this suggests a conscious reference to the Hijazi past and the oldest written form of the Qur'an.[120]

Kufic was developed at the turn of the eighth century, in the context of the state-building programmes of the caliphs 'Abd al-Malik and al-Walīd and their governor al-Ḥajjāj. The geometrical codification of the *script* happened in or shortly after 692, probably beginning in the realm of monumental mosaic inscriptions, with a special role

62. Horizontal Qur'an in Hijazi script (Khalili KFQ34, 17.5 x 25.5 cm).

being credited to the Dome of the Rock. Between that date and the beginning of al-Walīd's reign, in 705, it spread to different media and was consistently displayed as a vehicle of the public image of the new religion and state. In *manuscript,* the foundations of the Kufic tradition were also laid between these two dates. An initial phase of official commissions linked to architectural programmes was shortly followed by the spectacular development of a fully fledged Kufic calligraphy which adorned the pages of sumptuous Qur'ans that were sent to major mosques of the empire by the authorities. Such lavish codices may have continued to be produced for later members of the Umayyad ruling elite. They, in turn, appear to have triggered a conservative reaction in some religious circles, which was partly reflected in the use of different calligraphic styles and formats.